

Sandy Hook at Gateway National Recreation Area
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Eastern Boundary of Sandy Hook Bay,
North of Highlands
Highlands Vicinity
Monmouth County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-999

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SANDY HOOK AT GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

HABS No. NJ-999

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Eastern Boundary of Sandy Hook Bay, North of Highlands, Highlands Vicinity, Gateway National Recreation Area, Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Owner: National Park Service.

Significance: Sandy Hook, located within twenty miles of New York City, is significant in that it remains a relatively undeveloped stretch of land with a preserved natural landscape, despite the pressures of development throughout the surrounding Navesink Highlands. Sandy Hook is also the location of the now deactivated Fort Hancock Military Installations, which recalls a significant defensive history.

History: As early as 1879, George Houghton remarked on the area's lack of settlement, which made it an almost primeval refuge amid the increasing urban growth of both states. "Situated within twenty miles of America's metropolis, and threatened on every hand by advancing lines of hotels and summer boarding-houses, this isolated spot, owned and set apart by the government for certain special purposes, has resisted every attempted inroad of civilization."¹

Sandy Hook has been part of the Gateway National Recreation Area since 1973, and a National Historical Landmark for the last decade. Today, upon entering the park, the contemporary visitor travels down a long stretch of road surrounded by low vegetation, trees and beaches. The shape of the hook, particularly from the Highland's Twin Lights, appears an arbitrary production of the sea. At various times during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries storms and shifting sands transformed the peninsula into an island and then back into a peninsula again. Unlike most Jersey shore beaches, Sandy Hook is gaining sand every year; the lighthouse, that once stood only 500' from the sea, is currently about a mile and a half from the shore. Driving the hook, one can ignore the relatively minor park intrusions and imagine a wilder, nineteenth century. The first architectural monument, the visitor center, would have been seen by nineteenth century visitors after 1894. The Spermaceti Cove Lifesaving Station No. 2 replaced an even earlier station on the same site, one of the first in the nation.

The single road continues, passing near a holly forest and a more wooded area, to a series of forks delineating the Fort Hancock property. The tradition of military installations at Sandy Hook dates back to the American Revolution, when "the army of Sir Henry Clinton retreated from the field of Monmouth Court House."² During the war of 1812, Commodore Lewis' flotilla docked at the Hook and awaited

¹ George Houghton, "Sandy Hook--in 1879," Scribner's Monthly (William R. Jones, ed., Golden, CO: Outbooks, 1981), 3.

² Gustav Kobbe, The Jersey Coast and Pines: An Illustrated Guide-Book with Road Maps (1977), 4.

opportunities for "daring exploits" such as the capture of the enemy sloop "EAGLE."³ Between 1856 and 1857, barracks were constructed for men stationed at the Sandy Hook fort during the Civil War, housing nearly 500 men at the height of conflict. By 1879, the facilities housed about fifty government employees "connected with the ordnance department, the life-saving stations, and the light-house and signal service, or by Western Union telegraph operators" and their families.⁴ "The two long lines of two-story houses separated by a sandy road-way 100' wide" preceded the "barracks" still present at the site.⁵ Building renewed in 1895, when the camp officially became Fort Hancock in memory of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock. The first of Captain Arthur Murray's Georgian designs was executed in 1898. The fort's eighteen Georgian Revival officer's homes articulated the military hierarchy; "the lieutenant's homes cost about \$8,200 each, captain's houses about \$12,000 each, and the larger commanding officer's house, \$19,000."⁶ Development, both in terms of buildings and military equipment, continued through the World Wars. Today, the complex that accommodated 18,000 in 1945, resembles a college campus in the summer. Facilities include the 1899 Sandy Hook Museum, which previously functioned as a jail, a laundry and tailor shop, YMCA, mess halls and other buildings ranging in date from 1877-1941.

Although deactivated in 1974, Fort Hancock's military installations recall a significant defensive history. The "first official proving ground for testing weapons and ordnance" was established on Sandy Hook's shores in 1874.⁷ One such experimental innovation, "the nation's first concrete gun battery, and the only steam-powered, lift gun battery ever built to protect an American harbor," appears like a medieval fortress amid the wooden Georgian revival fort buildings. Known as Battery Potter, the defensive platform was only equipped until 1906, when improvements in gun carriages made it less efficient. Battery Granger, the more effective "disappearing gun" system replacing potter, featured 10" caliber guns used up to World War II. The Nike missiles at Guardian Park, the most highly evolved weapons, were eventually responsible for closing the fort. Installed at Sandy Hook during the 1950s, the missiles created to destroy attacking jets ended the need for coastal land defenses. Examples of the Nike missiles are preserved at Guardian Park near the entrance to the fort.

³ Kohbe, 4.

⁴ Houghton, 13.

⁵ Houghton, 13.

⁶ Thomas J. Hoffman, "Fort Hancock," brochure (National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior: Eastern National Park and Monument Association).

⁷ Hoffman.

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Towering above the dormitories, workshops and batteries is the Sandy Hook lighthouse, a structure pre-dating all military construction. The oldest lighthouse still operating in the country, Sandy Hook was built between 1763 and 1764. Initially inspired through the urging of New York merchants who were tired of losing their cargoes to the sea, the lighthouse became a state project funded by a special lottery. The New York Mercury's report of the first lighting on June 11, 1764, included a description of the structure.

The house is of an Octagon Figure, having eight equal sides; the diameter at the Base, 29'; and at the Top of the Wall, 15'. The Lanthorn is 7' high; the circumference 33'. The whole construction of the lanthorn is Iron; the top covered with copper. There are 48 oil blazes. The building from the surface is nine stories; the whole from bottom to top, 103'.⁸

In 1842, two other lighthouses were constructed. Known as the West and East or Hook Beacon, these were 30' and 40' tall respectively, hardly comparable to the stately New York light.⁹ Today, the lighthouse is operated by the U.S. Coast Guard for navigational purposes and functions as part of Gateway National Park.

Nineteenth-century historians commenting on the loneliness of the peninsula, enhanced by the history of shipwrecks, expressed their fascination with technological devices for land and sea communication. An 1878 Harper's article noted that some workers' houses and "the signal station, the three light-houses and two telegraph stations for the ship news are the media between utter desolation and advanced civilization."¹⁰ The article continued, explaining the system of flag communication for ships entering the bay despatched from the U.S. signal service station. An employee of Atlantic and Pacific telegraph wired news of approaching vessels to New York, where the messages appeared on "hotel bulletins." The Hook was also linked to "civilization" by the New Jersey Southern railroad, whose tracks reached Horseshoe Cove about a mile from the end of the peninsula.¹¹ Though no taverns or boardinghouses accommodated travelers and fishermen, all could "obtain excellent meals from the boats of the New Jersey Southern Railroad," which were moored at the wharves surrounding the line's northern terminus.¹²

⁸ "Sandy Hook Lighthouse," brochure (National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior).

⁹ Kobbe, 6.

¹⁰ William H. Rideing, "Along Our Jersey Shore," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, vol. LVI (New York: Harper and Bros., 1878), 323.

¹¹ H. C. Woolman and T. F. Rose, Historical and Bibliographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast (1878, reprint, Toms River: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985), 18.

¹² Kobbe, 8.

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Perhaps more than any other region along the shore, Sandy Hook retains natural and architectural resources that represent more than 200 years of American history. Such careful preservation of beaches, buildings and batteries also maintains the area's rich mythology; legends of sea adventures and buried treasure become plausible among the dune grasses and beach plums. Even during the nineteenth century, Captain Kidd's tree, the only pine on the peninsula, was said to mark the pirate's plunder. While Scribner journalist George Houghton credited James Fenimore Cooper's The Water Witch for embellishing the tale, the Woolman atlas takes a more practical view. "The proximity of Sandy Hook to New York City, and its wild uninhabited state, with its easy accessibility and good and convenient harbor, made it a favorite rendezvous for refugees, outlaws and pirates during the Revolutionary War."¹³ Whether or not Captain Kidd and other "pirates" chose the hook for a hideout, victims of shipwreck had little choice but to take refuge on its shores. These unprepared visitors must have contributed to the mythology of Sandy Hook during the peninsula's more adventurous days. Today, the legends are kept alive in books, the visitor center, and the natural situation. Standing on the beach with a view of New York City skyscrapers and Highland's Twin Lights, the contemporary visitor observes centuries of change amid sands that could belong to either time.

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Summer 1991

- Sources: Hoffman, Thomas, J. "Fort Hancock," brochure. National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Eastern National Park and Monument Association.
- Houghton, George. "Sandy Hook--in 1879." Scribner's Monthly. Originally published 1880. William R. Jones, ed. Golden, CO: Outbooks, 1981.
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- Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources with in the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washinton, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991.

¹³ Woolman and Rose, 18.

Woolman, H.C. and T.F. Rose. Historical and Bibliographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast. Originally published 1878. Toms River: Ocean County Historical Society, 1985.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatz (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.